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SUBJECT: BANGLADESH: CYCLONE RECOVERY AND ELECTIONS HIGHLIGHTED
DURING STAFFDEL GROVE VISIT

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Cyclone reconstruction and political dialogue in Bangladesh were core themes of a visiting Senate State Foreign Operations Subcommittee staff delegation led by Paul Grove January 16-18. In meetings with the StaffDel, Government of Bangladesh (GOB) representatives and non-governmental organization (NGO) partners emphasized the country's long-term rehabilitation needs - including food needs - as Bangladesh recovers from the devastation caused by Cyclone Sidr. The StaffDel highlighted to Bangladeshi interlocutors the importance of a political dialogue among all interested parties as key to progressing toward national elections in Bangladesh by the end of 2008. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) Paul Grove, Michele Wymer and Nikole Manatt of the Senate Appropriations' Sub-Committee on State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs visited Bangladesh January 16-18. In addition to meeting with GOB officials, they visited USG projects aimed at combating HIV/AIDS, trafficking-in-persons, extremism and terrorism.

RECOVERY FROM CYCLONE SIDR

3. (SBU) GOB officials, at a meeting hosted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and at a dinner hosted by the Charg d'Affaires a.i., highlighted Bangladesh's continued need for assistance in recovering from Cyclone Sidr. Foreign Secretary Md. Touhid Hossain told the StaffDel crop destruction caused by the cyclone meant that Bangladesh is facing a 1.4 million metric ton food shortfall. He said the country would need international food support in the coming four to five months until the next rice crop is harvested. Over the long-term, the Foreign Secretary reported that Bangladesh was looking for assistance in rebuilding homes, schools and cyclone shelters, as well as infrastructure like roads and embankments.

4. (SBU) A GOB official key to the implementation of USG assistance programs in Bangladesh echoed the Foreign Secretary's comments. Md. Aminul Islam Bhuiyan, Secretary of the Economic Relations Department of the Ministry of Finance, said infrastructure repairs in cyclone-hit areas were crucial to helping restore the livelihoods of millions of Bangladeshis. For example, strengthened embankments could help protect lucrative shrimp and fish ponds from being washed away by future flooding and cyclones. One international donor said that while Bangladesh is not facing famine as a result of Cyclone Sidr, food shortages and high food prices put additional pressure on a population that already suffers from malnutrition and stunting.

5. (SBU) In conjunction with cyclone relief, the Foreign Secretary

told the StaffDel the GOB is keenly interested in applying for additional debt concessions through the U.S. Tropical Forest Conservation Act (TFCA). The GOB would like to apply more of the debt it owes the United States to nature conservancy through TFCA. The Foreign Secretary pointed out that the brunt of Cyclone Sidr was borne by the Sundarbans, a world heritage site that is home to a huge mangrove forest. Through TFCA, the GOB could use funds owed the United States to help restore the Sundarbans.

DIALOGUE KEY TO SUCCESSFUL POLITICAL OUTCOMES

¶6. (SBU) International NGOs (INGOs) like the International Republican Institute (IRI), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), and The Asia Foundation (TAF) outlined for the StaffDel some of the challenges Bangladesh faces politically as it prepares for national elections by the end of 2008. Chief among the requirements identified for successful elections is the ability of political parties to meet internally and to engage in substantive dialogue with Bangladesh's caretaker government. All the INGOs agreed that the political parties must reform and be based on a platform of issues rather than a personality driven leadership. However, reforms could only take place if parties were free to hold meetings and were invited to meet with the caretaker government to discuss political transition.

¶7. (SBU) In all its meetings with GOB officials, the StaffDel stressed the importance of dialogue between the political parties and the government and the importance of completely lifting the ban on political activity. Only by taking these steps can the caretaker government hope to solidify the support of political parties for the elections and a transition to the next, elected government. GOB officials like the Foreign Secretary pointed to recent comments made

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by Bangladesh's Chief Adviser that a political dialogue is planned and that the caretaker government remains committed to its election roadmap. The StaffDel noted that the U.S. Congress, as well as the executive branch, would be following closely political developments in Bangladesh throughout 2008.

USG ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS WARMLY RECEIVED IN BANGLADESH

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¶8. (U) In visits by and meetings with the StaffDel, recipients of USG assistance reported on the value of USG programs. For example, the StaffDel met with several Imams, who have received training on a variety of development issues through the USAID-funded Leaders of Influence (LOI) program. The Imams told the StaffDel they had learned much about economic development, health, education and disaster mitigation through the LOI program. The Imams said they applied the lessons they learned to their interaction with followers at their mosques and students at their madrassas. Several of the Imams reported that they used information from the LOI program in their Friday sermons. The Imams were unanimous in their desire for more interaction with the United States.

¶9. (U) The StaffDel also visited a USG-supported shelter home for victims of human trafficking and domestic violence. The shelter provides health care, legal aid, psychological-social counseling, and training in livelihood options to trafficking and domestic violence survivors under a USAID grant managed by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The NGO that manages the shelter and IOM staff briefed the StaffDel on the severity of these issues in Bangladesh and how USG support has been critical to involving the Government in addressing human trafficking from Bangladesh. The Government and NGOs now work much more closely together in preventing human trafficking and in providing adequate care for trafficking survivors.

¶10. (U) The StaffDel visited an injecting drug user rehabilitation center in downtown Dhaka. Members of the StaffDel visited with 20 women who had entered the center to change their lives and reject drug use and prostitution. Through this USAID-funded program, women complete a three-month rehabilitation program, which includes mental/psycho-social, physical and spiritual components. The

program also provides some vocational training and eventual job placement, often in factory jobs that are highly coveted in this impoverished nation.

¶11. (U) The StaffDel met with alumni of the ECA-funded Study of U.S. Institutes for Student Leaders and the Youth Exchange and Study programs. Participants discussed their experiences in the United States and how they are using their experiences on returning to Bangladesh. Alumni from both programs told the StaffDel that their views of the U.S. and the world in general changed as a result of these programs. Several students noted they have become much more civic-minded as a result. The alumni also noted that they maintain close contacts with other alumni as well as their host families in the U.S. using email and Internet social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook.

¶12. (SBU) COMMENT: Two key priorities for Bangladesh - recovery from Cyclone Sidr and progress toward elections by the end of the year - were echoed in many of the StaffDel's meetings. As part of longer term rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts in response to the cyclone, Embassy personnel told the StaffDel the Mission plans to continue the model of Diplomacy-Defense-Development working together, a model that was successful during the immediate response after the cyclone hit on November 15. The StaffDel was briefed on the inter-agency teams that are currently deployed to the cyclone affected areas to conduct a month-long assessment and to deliver immediate assistance where appropriate through quick impact projects. Ongoing military engagement programs, including International Military Education and Training (IMET), demonstrated during the immediate response phase the high degree of interoperability between U.S. and Bangladeshi forces. For example, the Bangladeshi liaison officers embarked on the Kearsarge and Tarawa were all graduates of U.S. professional military education through IMET.

¶13. (U) Paul Grove cleared this cable.